War Brings Out Brilliant Letter Writers

By DOROTHY SCARBOROUGH.
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THROUGH literature the world is receiving and will receive at least a measure of compensation for the ravage and the waste of war. In novel and story, in play, in poem, in song, we are getting and will get a mental and spiritual equivalent for some of the anguish borne. We see the war as the great protagonist in the dramatic story of to-day.

Yet it is not in studied literary efforts, nor in conscious attempts to express the inexpressible, that restitution comes to us. The struggle is too big to be put into any man's novel or story or play, and in reading war literature we feel inadequacy, ineffectualness, as we turn the pages; a sick disappointment that the writer has not measured up to his theme. But it could scarcely be otherwise. The war is too near to us as yet.

It is in letters, therefore, that we get the best expression so far of the struggle, and in letters not written for publication, but intimate, personal, revelatory as matter meant for the public eye can never sincerely be.

A Revival of Letter Writing.

The war has had a curious effect in a renascence of the art of letter writing. In this busy age, with typewriters and dictating mechanisms taking the place of the personally penned letter, when there is no time for men to write the leisured epistles of their grandfathers, the letter as a medium of expressing anything except facts had almost become extinct.

Men have usually left the duty of writing the necessary family letters to their womenfolk; it sufficed that Aunt Jane or Cousin Sara should learn that all were well. Youths away from home were wont to confine their efforts to brief notes; the food was rotten and Mother might send a box; a check from Dad would be most welcome. Social engagements have been made over the telephone to save writing notes. Men are ordinarily fluent letter writers only as lovers.

But the war has changed all this. Soldiers send missives as well as missiles from the trenches, and the missives also reach the mark. Men who customarily regarded the personal letter as a disagreeable duty to be dodged, who would almost have preferred the amputation of a finger to writing a purely social epistle, who carried on business communication through secretaries who could be trusted to compose appropriately—these men, wrenched from sane and normal lives, torn from homes and families, are finding a solace in writing, a thrill in composition.

They write long and interesting personal letters that are human documents of value. They are finding themselves in the writing. John Masefield said of poets that war has brought out the poetry of life. So various young men who would not otherwise have done anything of distinction, have flamed out suddenly in bright glory as letter writers. Would there be so much for us to love in Rupert Brooke, in Alan Seeger, in the young Irish poet Ledwidge, if war had not irradiated their genius? And are not their letters as vital as their verse?

Better Words of Bigger Men.

The literary merit of these war letters—I am speaking now of genuine letters, not improvisations, documents for propaganda and such as we find in a book like *Christine*—consists not alone in their sincerity but in the value which big emotion gives to style. Men in the battle line write letters finer by so much as they themselves are bigger than their commonplace selves. Eternity waits around the corner; these few lines may be the last farewell; reserve, concealment, are impossible.

We get in these comunications everything; blithe humor as well as the reverence, fun making as well as simple prayer. We get, for example, the psychosis of the trenches, where, as one poet puts it,

> The joys of life are chiefly these:
> To have no lice and not many fleas!

yet where man learns to find the joys that are there and to show a face of humor to the hardships. We see the whimsical self-analysis of one's own nature, as in *A Letter from an Italian Reservist*, whose writer says: "A free spirit like myself soon learns to conceal things from a superior; a scrupulous soul like mine (and you can vouch for me in that respect) soon learns to steal from a neighbor his shoe brush or leather strap, lest I should be found lacking it by an inspecting Captain." We see the high hearted, whimsical description of rats, of "pots" of foods of all varieties, of divers martial disadvantages. The style is racy.

The humor of hospital life, as well as its gray, hopeless tragedy, are shown in various books, as for instance, *Mademoiselle Miss*, which consists of letters from an American girl serving with the rank of Lieutenant in a French army hospital at the front. We see the laughable side of ambulance work in *Ambulance No. 10*, by Leslie Buswell, a series of letters from the thick of the fight. *The Cross at the Front*, by Thomas Tiplady, a collection of letters from one who was with the Tommies in Flanders, gives their sly humor and comical courage as well as their martyrdom.

Sheer Poetry, These.

A poetic fervor, a poignant appreciation of nature, are often disclosed. For instance, in *A Crusader of France* (E. P. Dutton & Co.), a volume of the letters of Capt. Ferdinand Belmont, who was killed in action, we see a rare beauty of spirit and of style. Henri Bordeaux, the French novelist who writes the introduction, believes that these letters will live in literature because of their sincerity, their deep feeling for nature in its relation to man. In letters from the front, written by an ambulance worker, we have glimpses of the eternal poetry of nature, and thrill with the tired worker who could look away from his blesses for an instant to note such details as these: "A owl has just hooted—a musty old clock has just struck 6—a convoy wagon rolling along the road raises a cloud of golden dust—then silence again."

Letters from French soldiers, published in many collections, show an appealing poetry of thought, a rapt love for nature that is pathetic as shown in the face of death. *Young Soldiers of France* (Houghton Mifflin Company), by Maurice Barrès, brings together a number of letters written by the boyish knights of modern France, letters that have a heart-breaking beauty when we realize that the boyish hands that penned them are wasted forever. These letters show a passion for loveliness of soul as for outward nature, as if these young hearts were purifying themselves for the swift sacrifice.

The Consecrated Living.

A deep spiritnality, a flaming zeal for righteousness, is apparent in many of these published and unpublished collections of letters from the front. *We of Italy* (E. P. Dutton & Co.), a recent volume of letters from Italian soldiers brought together by Mrs. K. R. Steege, shows the consecration, the uplifted heart of many a private soldier, many an officer, who gave his life for Italy.

We read of solemn masses held just before the battle, of confessions deeply pathetic in the light of imminent danger, of surrender of self and selfish ambitions to the service of Italy, of undaunted death, facing the foe. We see heroes in all ranks, meet shy souls that insist on being nameless when their bravery calls forth praise. We see the same feeling in the letters of Englishmen, too, as in *Carry On*, by Lieut. Coningsby Dawson, who says, "Bodies may die, but the spirit of England grows as each new soul speeds on its way." In what Dawson calls "the barbaric loneliness of Hell" he can realize life's deepest verities.

In *A Soldier of France to His Mother*, the letters of a young French painter who "disappeared" in an April battle in the Argonne, is revealed a noble beauty of soul, something of the sad philosophy of Shelley, the bewilderment of a youth at life's mysteries, yet his feeling for humanity's grandeur. This lad wrote verses in the trenches, yet his life was a nobler poem, as shown by his last letter, which closes, "Whatever happens, life has had beauty for me."

Action's Dramatic Thrill.

There is an abundance of stirring action in these letters that may well furnish material for future writers of the drama. For example, in the recently published letters (Houghton Mifflin Company) of Norman Prince, the young American who organized the Lafayette Flying Squadron, we see the dangers that the gallant aviator faces, feel the thrills that are his daily portion and glimpse the high ideals which that service demands of men.

The Letters of a Canadian Stretcher Bearer (Little, Brown & Co.) gives us—it seems scarcely at second hand, so vivid are the descriptions—the action, the hardships, the excitement of the life which the writer knew. *Letters from France*, by Charles Bernard Nordhoff, tells of work among the wounded, where the shells scream ceaselessly, of battles in the air, of all the methods of siege and of conflict, each with its own dramatic interest.

In countless letters nowadays we are getting the satire, drama, humor, pathos and touching truth which constitute the stuff of which real life is made. If we see the mud and filth of the trenches, we look upward also, where gleam the stars. These men we meet have faced war without being brutalized and have met death undefeated. From them we know the justice of our cause. Indeed, that we know from some whose ties of blood are with Germany, as in *A Family Letter*, by Rudolph Heinrichs, published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, which stated unanswerably the reasons why Americans may not be passive now, why the issues of right and wrong are so clearly drawn that passive loyalty is in itself deeply disloyal.

No Longer to Be Feared.

GERMANY'S ANNEXATIONIST AIMS—By S. Grumbach. Translated by Ellis Barker. (E. P. Dutton & Co.) $1.50.

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